DARK HORSE COMICS

ROBERT E. HOWARD'S IRONHAND OF ALMURIC™

1 OF 4
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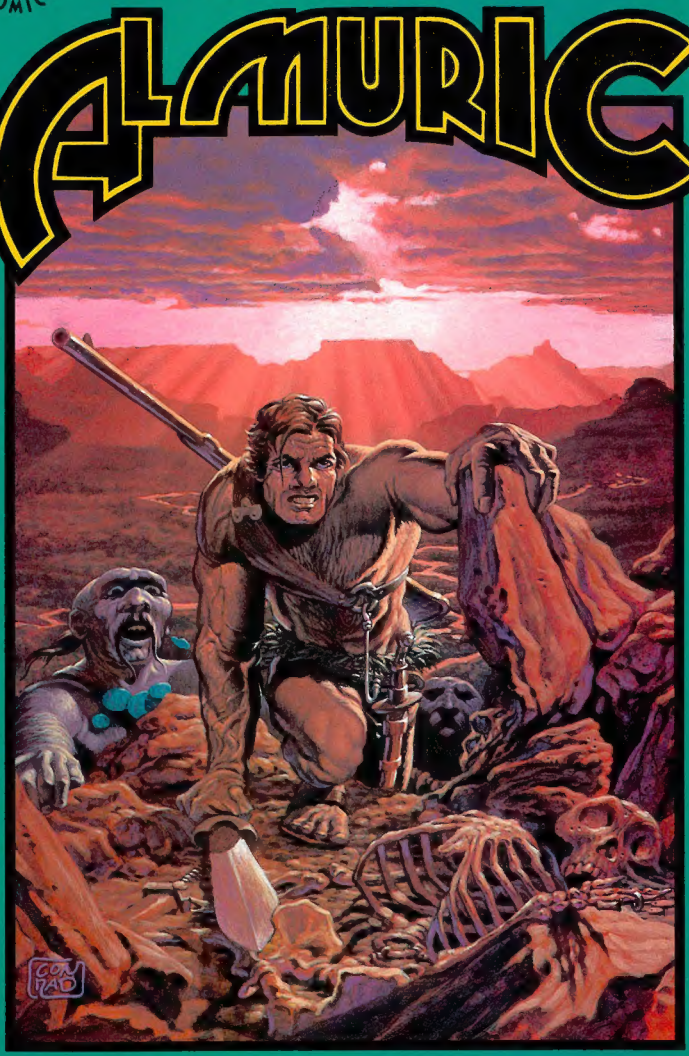

ROY THOMAS AND MARK WINCHELL

IRONHAND OF ALMURIC™

based on characters created by
Robert E. Howard

script by
Roy Thomas

art by
Mark Winchell

lettering by
Jean Simek

technical advisor
Glenn Lord
cover by
Tim Conrad
editor
Randy Stradley
publisher
Mike Richardson

V. P. Operations • Neil Hankerson
Managing Editor • Diana Schutz
Art Director • Cece Cutsforth
Production Manager • Chris Chalenor
Production • Jack Pollock,
Monty Sheldon, Steven Birch,
Carolyn Megyesi, Steve Posey,
Cary Grazzini, Forrest Norvell
Controller • Brad Horn
Operations • Debbie Byrd,
Tiffany Schlobohm
Marketing • Bob Schreck
Editorial • Barbara Kesel,
Jerry Prosser, Chris Warner

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FROM THE DICTAPHONE JOURNAL OF PROFESSOR AVERY HILDEBRAND, 1940:
IS IT REALLY TWO YEARS SINCE I TRANSPORTED ESAU CAIRN ACROSS THE OCEAN OF SPACE TO THE DISTANT PLANET ALMURIC, BY A METHOD KNOWN ONLY AS THE GREAT SECRET?
AT LAST ONE CAN CONTINUE THE STORY OF THIS MAN WHO FLED ONE WORLD, WHICH FEARED AND PERSECUTED HIM -- TO BECOME THE GREATEST WARRIOR OF ANOTHER.
AND, ONCE AGAIN, THE TALE SHALL BE TOLD IN HIS OWN WORDS!
"ALL DAY, OUR WALKERS HAD BENT THE THICK GRASSES BENEATH THEIR HAIRY FEET...
"...OUR STALKERS POUNDED UPON THEIR THUNDEROUS DRUMS...
"...AND OUR THRUMMERS HAD BEAT THE BUSHES WITH THEIR HEAVY CLUBS...
"...WHILE OUR UNHORAS STAMPED THEIR GREAT UNSHOD HOOVES IMPATIENTLY.
"BUT BEWARE ON EARTH OR ON ALMURIC, OF SEEKING TOO HARD FOR ANYTHING...
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CROWNLESS IN KOTH
IRONHAND--
TUSK-BEAR!
HRRRRRR
"...FOR YOU MAY JUST FIND IT!
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"OF ALL THE CREATURES ON MY ADOPTED PLANET, THE TUSK-BEAR IS PERHAPS THE MOST FEARED--
IT'S TURNING--!
LOOK OUT!
RRRRR
"--NOT LEAST BECAUSE IT ITSELF IS UTTERLY FEARLESS.
"BUT IF SPEARS AND ARROWS WEREN'T ENOUGH TO BRING THE HULKING CARNIVORE DOWN--
"I WAS NEVER MORE WRONG!
RRR
RR
"--I FELT CERTAIN A SINGLE WELL-PLACED BULLET FROM MY BREECH-LOADING RIFLE WOULD DO THE TRICK.
HOW THICK IS THAT BRUTE'S SKULL, THAB?
TOO THICK, ESAU CAIRN!
YOU RUN!
NO! I LED THIS GREAT HUNT OUT OF THE CITY OF KOTH, WITH MY HEAD HELD HIGH--
--AND I WON'T LEAD IT BACK IN WITH MY TAIL BETWEEN MY LEGS!
"THAB THE SWIFT WAS ONE OF THE BRAVEST OF THE KOTHANS."
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"BUT AT THE FATAL MOMENT--
"--HE FLED.
HNRRR
"I'D PROBABLY HAVE DONE THE SAME, IF I'D STOPPED TO WEIGH THE RISKS OF WHAT I WAS ABOUT TO TRY.
"THE TUSK-BEAR ROARED DOWN UPON ME WITH THE SPEED OF AN EXPRESS TRAIN.
"WHEN IT STRUCK MY OUTSTRETCHED SPEAR, ITS MASS PUSHED THE BOTH OF US BACK-WARD--
"--TILL THE SPEAR'S HAFT MET THE BOULDER AT MY BACK.
"STILL THE BEAST KEPT COMING--PROPELLED BY ITS OWN VAST BULK--
"--THE SPEAR BEING DRIVEN DEEPER, EVER DEEPER INTO ITS THROAT--AND BEYOND--
"--EVEN WHILE ITS MASSIVE CLAWS FLAILED THE AIR FOR ME.
"AND THOSE ONCOMING LEVIATHAN JAWS OPENED WIDE ENOUGH TO SWALLOW A MAN WHOLE--
"I FELT ITS VOLCANIC BREATH CASCADE OVER ME, AS IT IMPALED ITSELF STILL FURTHER ON THE BRACED SPEAR.
"--ONLY TO CLAMP SHUT, MERE INCHES FROM MY FACE.
"IT FORCED ME BACK-- BACK--
"--TILL I HAD NO FARTHER TO GO, WITHOUT BEING CRUSHED BETWEEN FANG AND ROCK.

"THEN, I FELT A CONVULSIVE SHUDDER PASS THROUGH THE LENGTH AND BREADTH OF ITS MASSIVE FRAME--
"--TILL I THOUGHT THE VERY SPEAR IN MY HAND WOULD SHATTER FROM THE VIOLENT VIBRATIONS--
COME, MY LADS!
THAT'S ENOUGH HUNTING FOR ONE TRIP!
TIME TO RETURN TO KOTH!
"--AND THE BEAST WAS DEAD.
"ONCE, I HAD TRAVERSED THESE SAME PLAINS, ALONE AND ON FOOT--A STRANGER ON A STRANGE PLANET.
ALL HAIL ESAU IRONHAND!
"NOW, I RODE AT THE HEAD OF SOME OF THE MIGHTIEST FIGHTING-MEN OF THIS WORLD, AND ALL OF THEM DID ME HOMAGE.
"IT MADE MY HEAD SPIN TO REALIZE HOW FAR I'D COME, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE--

"--SINCE THAT NIGHT ON EARTH, TWO YEARS BEFORE, WHEN I'D STOOD DUMBSTRUCK OVER THE CORRUPT POLITICAL BOSS WHO'D ALL BUT FORCED ME TO KILL HIM.
"KNOWING THAT MY CHANCES OF A FAIR TRIAL--LET ALONE MERCY--WERE LESS THAN HAILE SELASSIE EVER HAD AGAINST MUSSOLINI IN ETHIOPIA, I RAN FOR IT.
"THE STATE'S COPS HAD ORDERS TO SHOOT FIRST--AND NOT EVEN BOTHER TO ASK QUESTIONS LATER.
"WHAT KINDLY FATE WAS IT, PROF. HILDEBRAND, THAT BROUGHT ME TO YOUR LAB IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WOODS?
"EVEN IF YOU EXPLAINED IT TO ME, I'D NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS UNDERSTAND THE 'GREAT SECRET' YOU USED TO SEND ME ACROSS THE VOID THAT NIGHT--
"--TO THE UNTAMED PLANET YOU CALLED ALMURIC.
"BUT I MADE THE BEST OF THE HAND THAT WAS DEALT ME...

"...AND WHEN, MONTHS LATER, THE LAST OF THE QUEEN YASMEENA'S BAT-WINGED YAGAS LAY DEAD AT MY FEET, I FOUND MYSELF PROCLAIMED THE PROUD WARRIOR-KING OF THE CITY CALLED KOTH...
"...AND, PROUDER STILL, THE MATE OF MY OWN BELOVED ALTHA.
"BOTH MY KOTHIANS AND THE MEN OF KNOR RECLAIMED THEIR WIVES, KIDNAPPED LONG BEFORE BY THE CRUEL YAGAS...
"...WHILE THE YELLOW- AND COPPER-SKINNED WOMEN SLAVES WERE FREED, AS WELL.
"SINCE THEY COULD NEVER RETURN TO THEIR HOMES BEYOND THE SO-CALLED 'GIRDLE' THAT CIRCLED THE PLANET LIKE A NOOSE OF STONE...
"...THEY WERE AT LEAST INVITED TO LIVE IN FULL FREEDOM, EITHER IN KOTH OR IN KNOR.
"AS THE TOWER WHICH HAD BEEN YASMEELA'S STRONGHOLD BURNED TO THE GROUND, THE APISH GURAS OF BOTH CITIES VOWED ETERNAL PEACE BETWEEN THEM.
"TOGETHER, WE WOULD UNITE THE OTHER SCATTERED SETTLEMENTS OF THIS HEMISPHERE NORTH OF THE GIRDLE--
"--AND I HOPED TO INSTILL SOME OF THE CULTURE OF MY OWN NATIVE PLANET INTO THIS SAVAGE RACE, BEFORE I DIED AND BECAME AS THE DUST OF MY ADOPTED WORLD.

"THUS, WHEN, A FEW DAYS AFTER THE HUNT, I RODE THROUGH THE CRUDE STONE WALLS OF KOTH, IT STRUCK ME ANEW:
"I HAD FORGED AN EMPIRE HERE ON ALMURIC... AN EMPIRE WHICH COVERED HALF A GLOBE...
"...AN EMPIRE OF WHICH KOTH WAS THE SHINING CROWN JEWEL...
"...AND KOTH'S PEOPLE, THE MOST BLESSED OF ALL THIS SPERE'S INHABITANTS!
"HOW THEIR HEARTS MUST SWELL WITH PRIDE, TO SEE THE SLAUGHTERED BEASTS OF THE HUNT, WHICH WE HAVE BROUGHT BACK WITH US, I THOUGHT.
"WELL, WHY NOT? THEY WOULD HAVE THEIR SHARE OF THE KILL, EACH AND EVERY ONE, WOULD THEY NOT, AS EVER?
"AND IF OCCASIONALLY THERE WAS ONE AMONGST THE CROWD WHO SCOWLED...
"...WHY THERE WERE ALWAYS TEN MORE TO HUSH HIM...
"...AND SING THE PRAISES OF IRONHAND!
THERE ARE, AFTER ALL, MALCONTENTS IN EVERY SOCIETY.
"I WAS ONE MYSELF, TWO YEARS AND MANY LIGHT YEARS AGO.

"BUT NOW I LIVED IN A NEW PALACE-- ONE WHICH WOULD SEEM RUDE TO BRITAIN'S WINDSORS, PERHAPS, BUT WHICH IS BY THE FAR THE MIGHTIEST ON ALMURIC.
GREETINGS, GREAT WARLORD.
"AND MORE-- WAITING THERE IN THE PALACE--

"---IS MY BEAUTIFUL ALTHA.
WELCOME HOME, MY LORD.
YOUR FUTURE SON'S KICKING TOLD ME YOU WOULD BE BACK TODAY.

SO YOU KNOW IT'LL BE A "HE," DO YOU?
AND EVIDENTLY A FORTUNE-TELLER, AS WELL!
SO IT WOULD SEEM!
AH, ESAU CAIRN-- SO YOU HAVE DEIGNED TO COME BACK TO US AT LAST!
JUST WHEN I WAS BEGINNING TO LIKE SITTING THE THRONE AGAIN, IN YOUR STEAD.

I'M SURE YOU SAT IT WELL, KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER,
AND YOU CLEARLY ATE WELL AROUND THE CAMPFIRES, MY LOVE.
YOU HAD A BIT OF EXTRA FAT AROUND YOUR MIDDLE WHEN YOU LEFT--
--BUT NOW YOU SEEM POSITIVELY READY TO HIBERNATE!

LIFE ON THE TRAIL IS GOOD, ALTHA... PURE AND UNSPOILED.
IF NOT FOR YOU AND OUR UNBORN CHILD, BY THAK, I SOMETIMES THINK I'D THROW OVER THE THRONE, AND GO LIVE IN THE WILD-- AS I DID WHEN I FIRST CAME TO ALMURIC.

AND IF YOU DID, IRONHAND, PERHAPS WE WOULD GET SOME OF THE MEAT THAT'S GATHERED ON THESE GREAT HUNTS--
--INSTEAD OF YOUR NOBLES GETTING IT ALL, AND FEEDING US ON WILD BERRIES AND KICKS IN THE BACKSIDE!
"AS THEY USED TO SAY BACK ON EARTH, AND PROBABLY STILL DO:
'EYES THEY HAVE, BUT THEY SEE NOT.'

"THAT NIGHT, ALTHA AND I JOINED THE NOBLES OF THE COURT-- IF I MAY CALL RUDE APE-MEN 'NOBLES' -- FOR A FEAST OF ROAST TUSK-BEAR.
"NO GURA WAS LOUDER IN TOASTING MY MATE AND MYSELF THAN KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER, WHO HAD RULED KOTH BEFORE I CAME ALONG, AND WHO WAS STILL MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND.
"BUT MY GAZE, AFTER A FEW FLAGONS OF WINE, WAS ON THE MANY-HUED GIRLS WHO DANCED SEDUCTIVELY FOR OUR AMUSEMENT...
"...AND MOST ESPECIALLY UPON ONE WHOSE COPPER SKIN... MADE HER SEEM A BRONZED STATUE OF APHRODITE, COME SUDDENLY TO LIFE UPON A DISTANT, SAVAGE WORLD.
"IT'S GOOD TO BE A KING.
THAT'S ENOUGH!
DANCE ANY CLOSER TO MY MATE, GIRL--
--AND, BABY-- FULL AS I AM, I'LL TEAR YOUR HAIR OUT!
HAH!
YOU'RE RIGHT, ALTHA!
I'VE DRUNK TOO MUCH, WHEN EVEN MY EYES STRAY TO ANOTHER-- BUT YOU KNOW THAT'S ALL THAT EVER WANDERS FAR FROM YOUR SIDE.
DON'T YOU THINK I KNOW THAT, MY LOVE-- OR I'D HAVE CLAWED THEM OUT!
ALTHA...
I LOVE YOU.
"AND I DID.
"AND I DO.

"ON EARTH, I'D LEARNED EARLY THAT I WAS STRONG ENOUGH TO GENERALLY GET MY WAY, WITHOUT HAVING TO HURT ANYONE.
"THIS WAS EVEN TRUER ON ALMURIC, WHERE I'D GROWN FAR STRONGER THAN I'D BEEN ON MY NATIVE WORLD.
"SO WHY DID I YIELD TO THE TEMPTATION TO DO WHAT I DID NEXT?
KHOSSUTH--I CHALLANGE YOU TO A BOUT OF WRESTLING, IF YOU'RE GAME!
BUT, IRON-HAND--
WHAT'S WRONG? ARE YOU AFRAID?
I WILL FIGHT YOU, ESAU IRONHAND--
--IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WANT.
"DOUBT-LESS THE WINE HAD MUCH TO DO WITH MY CHALLENGE--AND WITH THE FACT I DIDN'T TELL MY RELUCTANT FOE--
"--FOR TEN WHOLE SECONDS.
NNNHN--!
KLUNKK
HAHAHAHAHA
GET UP, MAN!
YOU LOOK RIDICULOUS DOWN THERE ON THE FLOOR.
IRONHAND!
WHO--?
NOW, A TOAST TO KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER--A GOOD LOSER...
O-DEAD...
THEY'RE ALL DEAD!
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BRAG!--
THUDD
WHAT HAPPENED, MAN?
F-FROM BEYOND, IRONHAND...
...FROM BEYOND THE GIRDLE...
I...
"AND THEN, HE FELL BACK AND DIED...
"...WITHOUT A MARK UPON HIS BODY.
HANDLE HIS CORPSE GENTLY.
SINCE WE FOUGHT TOGETHER AGAINST THE YAGAS, BRAG! OF KHOR HAS BEEN ONE OF MY MOST LOYAL FRIENDS.
THAT'S WHY I PUT HIM IN CHARGE OF THE TROOPS WHICH GUARD OUR SIDE OF THE GIRDLE.
I MUST TAKE AN ARMY SOUTH, TO LEARN WHAT THREAT MAY HAVE BREACHED IT...
SHALL I COME WITH YOU?
NO, KHOSSUTH, YOU MUST STAY HERE AND RULE THE CITY, AS YOU'VE DONE DURING MY HUNTING TRIPS.
WHAT IRONHAND WILLS--KHOSSUTH DOES,
GOOD MAN.
ESAU--DON'T GO! IF YOU DO, I FEAR-- I WILL NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN ALIVE!
DON'T BE SILLY.
YOU JUST STAY HERE AND TAKE CARE OF OUR UNBORN CHILD.
I'LL BE BACK BEFORE YOU KNOW I'M GONE.
"I WAS ALWAYS A BETTER WARRIOR THAN I WAS A PROPHET.
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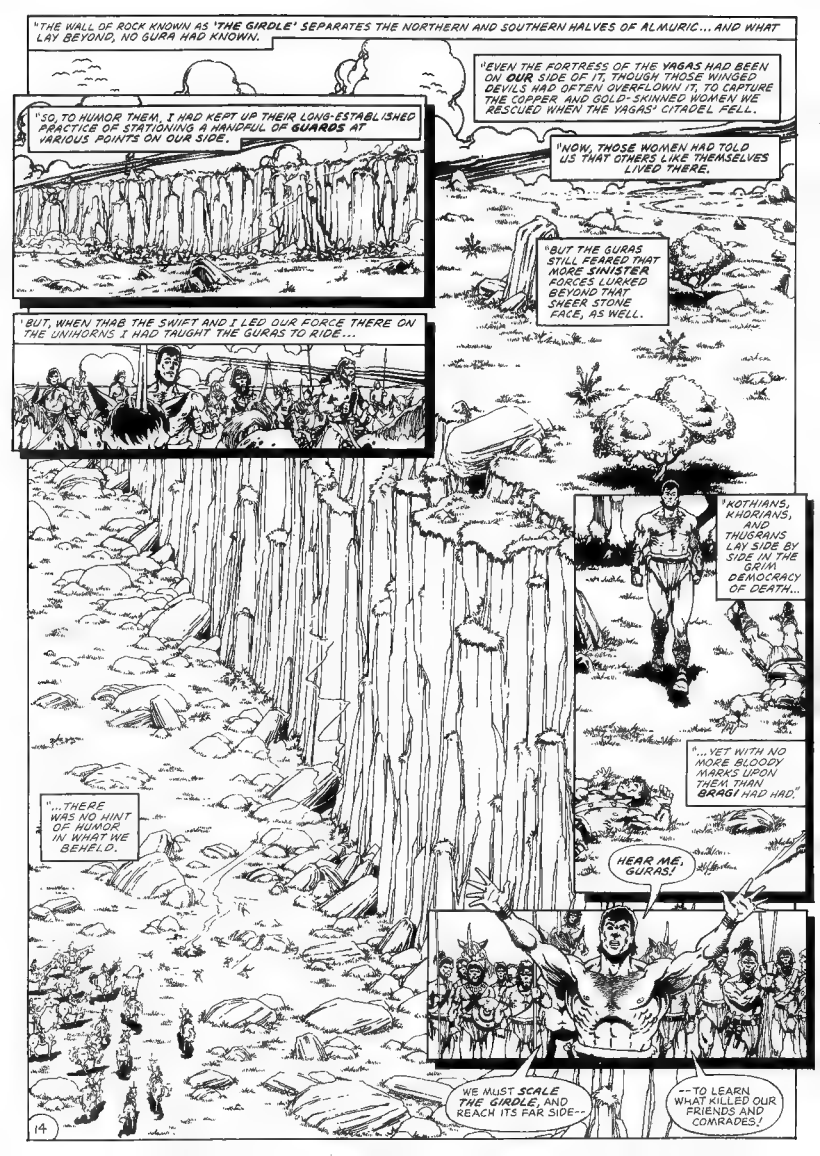
"THE WALL OF ROCK KNOWN AS 'THE GIRDLE' SEPARATES THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN HALVES OF ALMURIC... AND WHAT LAY BEYOND, NO GURA HAD KNOWN.
"EVEN THE FORTRESS OF THE YAGAS HAD BEEN ON OUR SIDE OF IT, THOUGH THOSE WINGED DEVILS HAD OFTEN OVERFLOWN IT, TO CAPTURE THE COPPER AND GOLD-SKINNED WOMEN WE RESCUED WHEN THE YAGAS' CITADEL FELL.
"SO, TO HUMOR THEM, I HAD KEPT UP THEIR LONG-ESTABLISHED PRACTICE OF STATIONING A HANDFUL OF GUARDS AT VARIOUS POINTS ON OUR SIDE.
"NOW, THOSE WOMEN HAD TOLD US THAT OTHERS LIKE THEMSELVES LIVED THERE.
"BUT THE GURAS STILL FEARED THAT MORE SINISTER FORCES LURKED BEYOND THAT SHEER STONE FACE, AS WELL.
"BUT, WHEN THAB THE SWIFT AND I LED OUR FORCE THERE ON THE UNIHORNS I HAD TAUGHT THE GURAS TO RIDE...
"KOTHIANS, KHORIANS, AND THUGRANS LAY SIDE BY SIDE IN THE GRIM DEMOCRACY OF DEATH...
"...YET WITH NO MORE BLOODY MARKS UPON THEM THAN BRAGI HAD HAD."
"...THERE WAS NO HINT OF HUMOR IN WHAT WE BEHELD.
HEAR ME, GURAS!
WE MUST SCALE THE GIRDLE, AND REACH ITS FAR SIDE--
--TO LEARN WHAT KILLED OUR FRIENDS AND COMRADES!
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NO! TO CHALLENGE THE GREAT WALL IS DEATH!
NO ONE HAS EVER DONE SO-- AND RETURNED ALIVE!
WHAT?
YOU KNOW WE WOULD FOLLOW YOU INTO HELL, IRONHAND...
BUT DO NOT ASK US TO CHALLENGE THE GIRDLE!
I'LL ASK NOTHING-- OF WOMEN AND COWARDS!
THEN- WE CAN BURY OUR DEAD, A RETURN TO KOTH?
YOU SPINELESS BASTARDS CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT.
I'M GOING TO CLIMB THE GIRDLE!
I KNEW MY GURAS WELL, EVEN THEN.
"WHEN THEY SAW THEIR LEADER SCALING THAT RAGGED STONE FACE, READY TO BRAVE ALONE THE TERRORS BEYOND, THEY EYED ONE ANOTHER SHEEPISHLY--
"--AND THEN BEGIN TO CLIMB."

"AS I NEARED THE TOP, MY MUSCLES WERE A BIT SORER THAN I'D THOUGHT THEY WOULD BE--
"BUT I STILL GAVE A DEFIANT LAUGH.
"I WAS READY FOR ANYTHING--
"OR SO I THOUGHT."
GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS, ESAU CAIRN.
"THE HUGE, SMILING FACE WHICH LOOMED BEFORE ME WAS THAT OF THE GENIAL OLD SCIENTIST WHO HAD TELEPORTED ME ACROSS THE VOID OF SPACE TO THIS PLANET..
"...EVEN THE VOICE WAS THE SAME, THOUGH NOW IT ECHOED LIKE BOOMING THUNDER."
I REALLY CAN'T LET YOU CROSS OVER TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE GIRDLE, YOU KNOW.
IT JUST ISN'T DONE.
PROFESSOR HILDEBRAND!?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF GAME YOU'RE PLAYING, PROFESSOR--
--IF YOU REALLY ARE THE PROFESSOR--
--BUT NOBODY, ON EARTH, OR ON ALMURIC, TELLS IRONHAND WHERE HE CAN GO!
IRONHAND--WHO IS UP THERE WITH A VOICE LIKE A ROARING WATERFALL?
ONLY A PHANTOM, GUIRAS--NOTHING MORE.
COME ON, MY LADS--

WE'RE GOING OVER THE TOP!
"THE NEXT INSTANT--IT STRUCK ME.
AARRRRR
"IT WAS AS IF SOMEONE HAD SUDDENLY PLUNGED A KNIFE INTO MY BRAIN--WITHOUT BOTHERING TO CUT THROUGH THE SKULL FIRST.
"FOR A FLEETING MOMENT, I MANAGED, IN SPITE OF THE PAIN, TO HANG ON TO THE KNOTTED GRASSES AT THE TOP OF THE GIRDLE...
"...THEN I FELL."
"AND EVEN AS I DID, I WAS VAGUELY AWARE THAT THE GURAS CLIMBING BEHIND ME HAD BEEN HIT BY THE SAME SUDDEN STAB IN THE MIND--
"NOR WERE THOSE WAITING BELOW SPARED THE SUDDEN AGONIZING THROB.
"--AND WERE DROPPING FROM THE ROCK FACE LIKE SO MANY FLIES.
"MOST OF MY MEN BROKE THEIR NECKS, OR THEIR BACKS, IN THE FALL.
"THE CORPSE OF ANOTHER GURA BROKE MY FALL--JUST BARELY--
"--OR ELSE I, TOO, WOULD NEVER HAVE RISEN AGAIN."

"STAGGERING TO MY FEET, I FORCED MYSELF TO BELIEVE I MUST HAVE DREAMED THAT COLOSSAL FLOATING HEAD--
"--BUT A GLANCE UPWARD ASSURED ME I HAD NOT.
"THE MAMMOTH IMAGE OF PROFESSOR HILDEBRAND STILL HOVERED THERE...
"...WHILE THE FEW GURAS WHO HAD SURVIVED THE MENTAL ONSLAUGHT STUMBLED ABOUT WILDLY.
"I COULD TELL BY THEIR FEVERED CRIES AND GARBLED SYLLABLES THAT THEIR MINDS HAD SNAPPED--UNDOUBTEDLY FOR GOOD.
"HOW I MANAGED TO FIND AND MOUNT MY FRIGHTENED STEED IN THAT MELEE, I SHALL NEVER KNOW--
"--BUT I REMEMBER A LAST LOOK BACKWARD, AT A SEA OF BROKEN CARCASSES AND SHATTERED MINDS...
"...AS THE GIGANTIC FACE ON HIGH SMILED, IF ANYTHING, MORE BROADLY THAN BEFORE...
"...THEN WINKED OUT OF EXISTENCE."
"AS I SPURRED MY UNIHORN AWAY, THEN COLLAPSED ONTO ITS BROAD BACK, I WONDERED IF PROFESSOR HILDEBRAND HAD SENT ME HERE TO ALMURIC ONLY SO THAT HE COULD KILL ME LATER...
"...OR AT LEAST DRIVE ME MAD."

"I HAVE NO MEMORY OF HOW LONG IT TOOK MY STEED TO CARRY ME BACK TO THE WALLS OF KOTH.
"SEVERAL DAYS, AT THE VERY LEAST.
"I DO NOT RECALL SHOUTS OR HUZZAHS BEING RAISED AT OUR SLOW APPROACH...
"...THOUGH THE GUARDS MUST HAVE OPENED THE GATES TO ADMIT US.
"I RECOLLECT, DIMLY AS FROM A DREAM, A FEW GUIRAS WATCHING OPEN-MOUTHED AS MY UNHORN CARRIED ME THROUGH THE STREETS...
UNNH
"...TO COLLAPSE AND DIE, WITHIN SIGHT OF THE BUILDING I HAD MADE MY ROYAL PALACE.
"I REMEMBER WONDERING VAGUELY WHY NO ONE STEPPED FORWARD TO HELP ME, AS I PULLED ONE LEG FREE FROM BENEATH THE MASSIVE BULK OF THE DEAD BEAST...
"...AND STUMBLED TOWARD MY THRONE ROOM."
"ALTHA WOULD BE THERE--
"--DEAR BELOVED ALTHA:-
"--AND THIS NIGHTMARE WOULD SOON VANISH, AS SURELY AS HAD HILDEBRAND'S SMIRKING FACE."
"UNASSISTED, I REACHED THE THRONE ROOM...
ALTHA--!?
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OH... HELLO, KHOSSUTH.
I... AM HOME.
I HAVE... MUCH TO TELL YOU... ABOUT MY JOURNEY TO...
SILENCE, ESAU CAIRN!
HOLD YOUR TONGUE WHEN YOU ARE IN THE COURT OF KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER!
WH-WHAT THE HELL... ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
THIS IS MY THRONE ROOM... NOT YOURS!
AND--THE COPPER-SKINNED MAIDENS WHO SERVE YOU-- I SEE THAT THEY WEAR TINY GOLDEN CHAINS.
WHY?
BECAUSE, ESAU CAIRN--
--YOU ARE A FOOL.
"IRONHAND," THEY CALL YOU.
IRON BRAIN IS MORE LIKE IT!
WHEN YOU BROUGHT US BACK FROM YUGGA, YOU PROUDLY PROCLAIMED THAT WE WERE FREE--
BUT THOSE WHO RULED WHILE YOU ROAMED AND PLAYED HAVE MADE US SLAVES AGAIN!
THERE IS NEVER ENOUGH FOOD-- WHATEVER THE RESULT OF YOUR HUNTS--
--AND WE WERE ABUSED LIKE CATTLE BEHIND YOUR BACK!
WOMAN-- SHUT UP--
--IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE!

I-- DO NOT UNDERSTAND.
MY HEAD-- STILL SPINS-- FROM WHAT HAPPENED AT THE SIRDLE.
ALTHA! WHERE IS MY ALTHA?
SHE WILL MAKE ME SEE THE TRUTH OF THINGS-- AS SHE ALWAYS DOES!
ALTHA IS DEAD.
WHAT?
SHE DIED IN CHILD-BIRTH, TWO DAYS AGO.
THE INFANT COULD NOT BE SAVED, EITHER-- NOT THAT KHOSSUTH DID MUCH TO TRY TO--
I SAID SHUT UP!
OHHH
THOK!
YOU DIRTY--!
JUST PRAY YOUR NECK'S AS STRONG--
--AS THAT GIRL'S JAW!
KRAK-K!
NNGGNAN
WELL, KHOSSUTH?
WAS THE COPPER GIRL TELLING THE TRUTH?
HAVE YOU DECIDED YOU'RE MAN ENOUGH TO TAKE THE THRONE OF KOTH BACK FROM ME?
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YOU ARE FINISHED, ESAU CAIRN!
I DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU AND THE OTHERS AT THE GIRDLE-- NOR DO I CARE!
WHATEVER IT WAS, IT WAS MERELY A BOON TO ME!
THE GIRL IS RIGHT.
FOR MONTHS, MY COMRADES AND I HAVE RULED KOTH IN SECRET, IN ALL WAYS THAT TRULY MATTERED.
YOU HAD TOO MANY FRIENDS BEFORE FOR ME TO CHALLENGE YOU OPENLY-- BUT THEY ARE NOT WITH YOU NOW.
YOU HAVE GROWN SOFT, ESAU CAIRN-- SOFT AND FLABBY UPON THE SEAT OF POWER.
AND SO, KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER CLAIMS THE THRONE ONCE MORE!
YOU BASTARD!
I'LL SHOW YOU HOW SOFT I AM.
I'LL BREAK YOUR NECK, TOO, LIKE A ROTTED TWIG.
GRAB HIM!
I LET YOU LIVE, KHOSSUTH, WHEN ALL IN KOTH WERE CALLING MY NAME-- AND I COULD HAVE SECURED MY BACK BY HURLING YOU INTO THE DEEPEST PIT
AND THIS IS HOW YOU REPAY ME!?
KILL HIM.
FTOK
"TODAY WAS THE DAY THEY WOULD HAVE THEIR POUND OF FLESH--
--IF I LET THEM!"
KRAAK
"THAT WAS WHAT THE SKULL-SPLITTER'S LAPDOGS HAD BEEN WAITING FOR.
"HOW THEY MUST HAVE SECRETLY HATED ME, AS A USURPER-- AND AN ALIEN-- NO MATTER WHAT I DID FOR KOTH.

"I WAS HOPELESSLY OUTNUMBERED--AND I KNEW IT.
"ALL THE SAME, IN AN EARLIER DAY, I WOULD HAVE FOUGHT MY WAY THROUGH TO KHOSSUTH, AND DIED WITH A DOZEN SPEARS IN MY BACK--AND MY HANDS AROUND HIS LIFELESS THROAT.
"BUT I HAD TO KNOW THE TRUTH...
"...THE TRUTH ABOUT ALTHA."
"AND SO I DID WHAT IT GALLED MY HEART WITHIN MY BREAST TO DO.
"I FLED."
"I PICKED OUT KHOSSUTH'S MOUNT...THE SWIFTEST IN KOTH, NEXT ONLY TO MY OWN, NOW DEAD...
"...AND I SCATTERED THE REST.
KRAKK
"IT WOULD BE SOME LITTLE TIME BEFORE I COULD BE FOLLOWED..

"...ASSUMING I MADE IT OUT OF KOTH ALIVE.
"YET THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE WAS WITH ME, SINCE NONE OF KHOSSUTH'S LACKEYS HAD EVER EXPECTED TO SEE ME COME OUT OF THE PALACE AGAIN."
"WHEN I HAD PASSED OUT THROUGH THE CITY'S GATE, EVERYTHING SUDDENLY SEEMED LIKE A DREAM TO ME.
"HAD IT ALL TRULY HAPPENED?"
"I HAD LEFT KOTH A KING-- AND RETURNED TO BECOME A HUNTED FUGITIVE."
"I SAW MY ALTHA'S LOVELY FACE BEFORE ME, SO REAL THAT I COULD NOT BRING MYSELF TO BELIEVE THAT SHE HAD REALLY PERISHED...
"...EITHER IN CHILDBIRTH, OR AT KHOSSUTH'S GRISLY HAND.
"BUT EVEN AS I GAZED, THE IMAGE SHIFTED... CHANGED...
"...INTO FIRST THE FACE OF KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER...
"...THEN OF PROFESSOR HILDEBRAND, WHO HAD FIRST SENT ME TO THIS STRANGE WORLD...
"...AND NOW HAD SHATTERED MY POWER AND MY LIFE, AS A GNARLED FIST DEMOLISHES AN ANTHILL.
"AND YET...
NO!
I AM ESAU CAIRN!
I AM IRONHAND!
TONIGHT, I MUST FLEE, BECAUSE NO MAN, HOWEVER STRONG OR RIGHTEOUS HIS CAUSE, CAN FIGHT AN ARMY.
BUT I WILL LEARN WHAT DEADLY FORCE FORCE KILLED MY COMRADES--
--AND THEN I'LL RETURN, TO TAKE MY REVENGE UPON KHOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER!
BY ALL THE GODS OF EARTH AND ALMURIC, I SWEAR IT!
"THEN I TURNED MY MOUNT'S GREAT HEAD SOUTHWARD...
"...AND BEGAN MY JOURNEY BACK TO THE GIRDLE...
"...AND BEYOND."
NEXT: OVER THE TOP!
24

RETURN TO THE PLANET ALMURIC™

by Roy Thomas

Robert E. Howard is best known as the creator of Conan the Cimmerian, who became better known as "Conan the Barbarian" after Marvel Comics (with Ye Writer as scripter and de facto editor) began publishing his adventures in 1970. (The latter three-word phrase was taken from a 1950s hardbound collection, and was never used as such by REH himself; since the largely misguided Arnold Schwarzenegger movie of the early 1980s, however, which took its title from the comic, it's as "Conan the Barbarian" that he will probably forever be known.)

At any rate, Conan was merely one of the last, if by far the most popular, of the heroes and concepts which Howard created during the 1920s and '30s, before he shot himself in 1936 at the tender age of thirty.

Most famous after Conan, of course, are his earlier creations King Kull (a prototype of Conan, as it turned out) and Red Sonja, who is based on a heroine named Red Sonya (yes, with a "y") whom he featured—as a supporting player, at that—in a non-Conan tale named "The Shadow of the Vulture."

Then there are: his earliest hero of sword-and-sorcery (a genre Howard largely created), Solomon Kane; his Pictish warrior-king Bran Mak Morn (featured in last year's *Kings of the Night* two-issue series from Dark Horse); Cormac Mac Art, star of the recent Dark Horse series impeccably illustrated by E.R. Cruz; not to mention Black Turlough, Dark Agnes, and many another.

And then there's Esau Cairn.

Cairn was something of a departure for Howard, since the novel *Almuric*, his one and only appearance, was a flat-out homage to the interplanetary romances of Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of John Carter of Mars and Carson of Venus, as well as the even-more-imitated Tarzan of the Apes.

Of course, Howard made Esau Cairn into a far more earthy and physical character than the too-good-even-for-two-planets John Carter. He was a sort of modern-day Conan, transplanted to

another planet, which, if hardly as well conceived as the best of ERB's worlds, still offered plenty of story possibilities. And, in the end, it's more plausible, too, in a sense, since it's far easier nowadays to accept the idea of life existing on a planet in another solar system than on Mars or Venus, let alone the Moon!

More than a decade ago, artist Tim Conrad and I, through the good graces of Glenn Lord, literary agent for the REH estate, adapted Almuric into a four-part story which appeared in Marvel's then-new *Epic Illustrated* magazine. *Epic*, for those too young to remember, was to *Heavy Metal* as Esau Cairn himself was to John Carter.

A few months back, with the gracious cooperation of Marvel V.P. Michael Hobson, Dark Horse was able to publish, for the first time in graphic novel form, the entire *Almuric* adaptation. Speaking just for myself—and referring to the art, not the script adaptation—I think it was one of the best-looking graphic novels to come out in a long time, due as much as anything to Tim's exquisite coloring. Many of the "hot" painted graphic novels are but glorified comic books or over-artsy mishmashes by comparison.

Almuric, however, though it was published in the semi-finished form in which it was left when Howard committed suicide, always cried out for a sequel. Or perhaps a number of sequels.

The great Girdle which circled the planet, the challenge to Esau Cairn of uniting this ever-warring world, the various hints in the original tale concerning certain mysterious beasts and races never shown in the novel, all of these left the door wide open for a second adventure set on Almuric.

This sequel, *Ironhand of Almuric*, is perhaps a bit unusual in that sense, since while it makes every effort to be faithful to the events and spirit of REH in most ways, in other ways all but turns the original tale on its head, by showing that all was not necessarily as it seemed in the first novel. This is not to argue that REH would have done it that way, had he lived to see *Almuric* published and gone on to write a sequel himself. There are as many potential sequels to *Almuric* as there are to the John Carter or even the Sherlock Holmes stories.

This is one of them, told in four parts. Neo-artist Mark Winchell and I hope you like it and the Tim Conrad covers that go with it.

it's 1999...
...do you know
where your
civil rights are?

a four-issue drama
by Sarah Byam
and Tim Sale

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Flogging a Dead Horse

Remember when you could look forward to your favorite serialized story in ***Dark Horse Presents*** being spun-off into its own title? ***Concrete***, ***Trekker***, ***Homicide***, ***Race of Scorpions***, and even ***Roachmill*** made the leap from the pages of ***DHP*** to their own series or specials. Think those good old days are gone forever? Think again!

This past year we've taken giant steps forward in the range and quality of material featured in ***DHP***—stories like **Frank Miller**'s ***Sin City***, **Matt Wagner**'s ***The Aerialist***, and **Stephen Cstoras** and **Stefano Gaudiano**'s ***Harlequin***, have all struck significant chords with their readers. And while we'll still showcase the occasional licensed feature—like ***Aliens*** or ***Predator***—Dark Horse remains committed to being the number one publisher of creator-owned comics. We're also committed to keeping our readers on their toes. For that reason, you can expect a number of exciting new series to spring from the fertile pages of your favorite anthology over the course of the next year.

Which exciting new series? Well, in no particular order: **Eddie Campbell**'s erudite and inebriated Bacchus has already taken the plunge into his own miniseries, ***Deadface: Doing the Islands With Bacchus*** (issue #3 of which is on sale this month); writer **John Arcudi** and artists **Tony Atkins** and **Paul Guinan** are teaming for an ***Aliens*** story that will introduce the upcoming four-issue series ***Aliens: Genocide***, by **Arcudi** and artists **Damon Willis** and **Karl Story**; **Anina Bennett** and **Paul Guinan**'s beautiful, brainy, and dangerous ***Heartbreakers*** (who recently concluded a three-issue run in ***DHP***) will be rocketing your way next spring in their own limited series; after the current "Violent Marv" story runs its course, **Frank Miller** has plans for a number of stand-alone stories set in the corrupt metropolis of ***Sin City***; and, finally, a guy by the name of **John Byrne** is introducing the world to a group of youngsters known as ***The Next Men*** who'll be starring in their own monthly color series!

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Now, with all of these new series spinning out of the pages of ***Dark Horse Presents***, you might think there'd be no room left for other features. Well, you *might* think that, but you'd be wrong. In upcoming issues of ***DHP*** you'll be getting monthly doses of humor from **Rick Geary**; new ***Homicide*** stories by **John Arcudi** and **Gray Morrow**—plus ***The Creep***, a ***Homicide*** spin-off from **Arcudi** and **Dale Eaglesham**; the star-spanning misadventures of ***Earth Boys***, by **Cliff Biggers**, **Brett Brooks**, and **Dave Johnson** (making the universe *un*safe for just about everyone!); the continuing sagas of ***The Aerialist*** by **Matt Wagner** and ***Sin City*** by **Frank Miller**, and even an appearance by our most famous charter member, **Paul Chadwick**'s ***Concrete***!

I could go on, but modesty (and lack of space) prevents me. I'll just end things with a word to the wise: miss an issue of ***Dark Horse Presents*** at your own peril!

-Randy Stradley

CHECKLIST

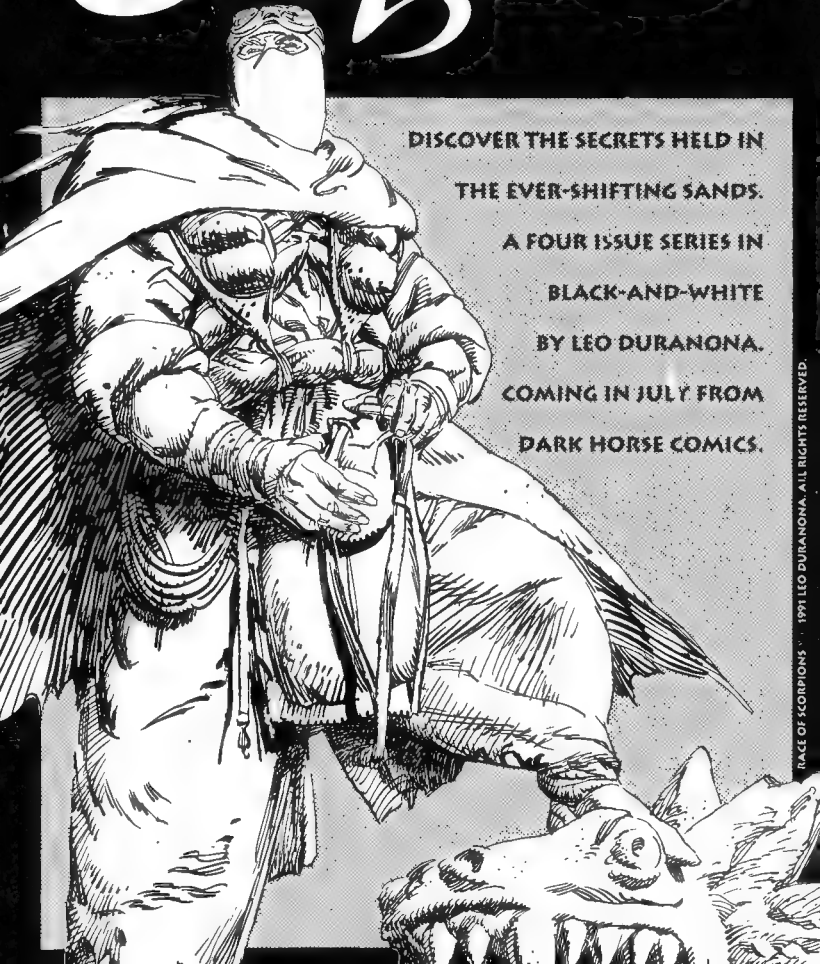
☐ **SHIPPING SEPTEMBER 3**
Dark Horse Presents #54
Venus Wars #6
Terminator Secondary Objective #3

☐ **SHIPPING SEPTEMBER 10**
Cheval Noir #22
Deadface #3
Race of Scorpions II #3
Predator Cold War #1

☐ **SHIPPING SEPTEMBER 17**
Billi 99 #1
Badlands #3

☐ **SHIPPING SEPTEMBER 24**
Almuric #1
Outlanders #33
Deadline #1
Indiana Jones #4
The Mask #2

Race of Scorpions™



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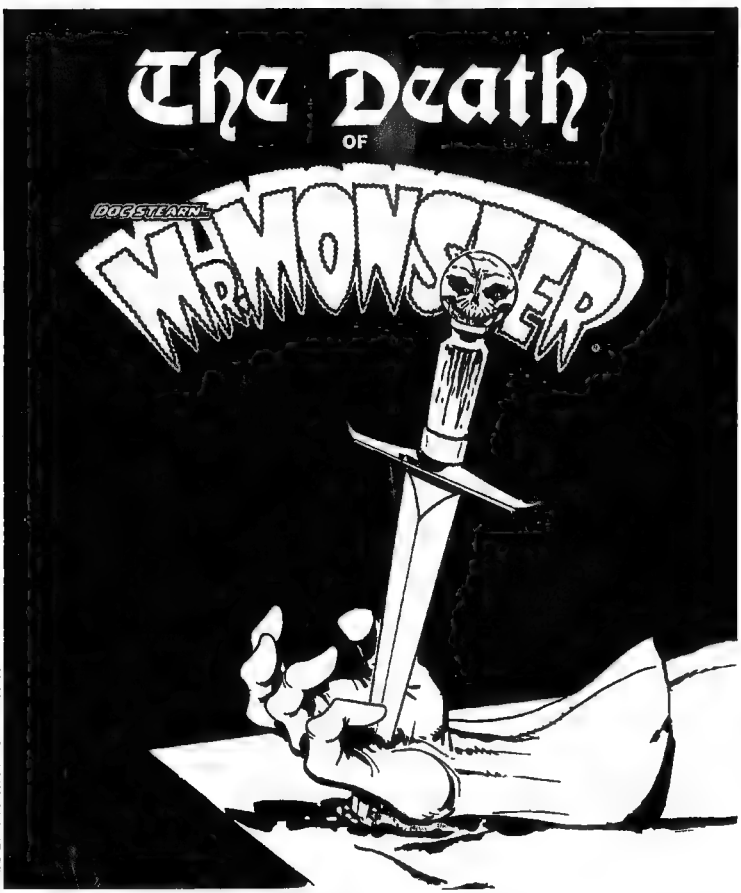

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